

Connecting   
Braided Collaborative Essays   
with   
Young Adult Literature



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When the stillness speaks…

by Jenny M. Martin

There is silence in the meeting house. Wooden benches in a square within a square formation attempt a circle with the only linear seating in the room. Some heads are bowed, some are not, some eyes closed, and some fixated on patterns in the wood floor or outside at the burnt orange, toasted yellow and faded crimson leaves. A man in a back row, one of the second layer of the squared benches, takes a deep breath, holds it a moment, then exhales; the release whispers through the room. He is settling down into the silence. My mother said this is a time to be still and listen to what my little voice is telling me. Silence. I remember once watching my father’s head bobbing as his deep meditation led him to sleep. The scandal of Dad sleeping in meeting kept me occupied for a bit as his chin lowered down, down, down toward his chest, then the weight of his head pulled him forward enough that he jerked himself subtly upright. In a moment the head lowering began all over again. A slight snort proved the tipping point for my Mom, and she nudged him with a gentle elbow to side. Sequestering my laughter racked my insides as Dad startled quietly in the stillness again. On the car ride home we laughed and harassed him. Today, though, no one seems to be sleeping. The peace comforts me. Silence. A bench creaks and my mother stands, breaking the silence. She shares a brief message about one of our miniature horses, Tinker. Earlier in the week she had been washing dishes and looked out of the window to see Tinker in our small pasture that was shadowed in part by Round Hill, a wooded mass with a humble elevation of about 1750 feet. The small horse, named Tinker, stood in the sun, basking in the rays that warmed her body. The message my mother shared centered on the simple fact that the horse knew where to stand. He stood in the sun and away from the cold shadows cast by Round Hill. She sits, bench creaking again. And in the energy filled silence I ask myself if I know where to stand.

***“What is that little voice telling you?”***

**Dear Jane,**

**Please come see me when you get a chance.**

**Ms. Moore**

After Jane’s missed deadlines, one-on-one talks about expectations and responsibility, and a frustrated staff that wanted to be led to producing a competitive yearbook, I had decided to remove her from the editor’s position. Then, my letter came:

**Dear Ms. Moore,**

**We request your attendance at a closed school board meeting session in regards to the removal of your yearbook editor from her position.**

**RCPS school board president**

***“Are you listening to your little voice?”***

When the e-mail came from my graduate advisor and supervisor, I attended to it as I do with all of his correspondence, quickly and with focus. I don’t even remember now what the body of the message was concerning, but the one line inquiry following his signature changed my life.

“Kindly pushing, when are you going to get started on your doctorate?”

I sat and stared at the screen’s challenging proposal.

***“Empty barrels make the most noise”***

Decisions. I find the simplest often require too much effort. What shall I do with this free moment of time? Should I say what is on my mind, or be silent? My son’s teacher told a kid that Patrick is friends with that he needs a filter. Maybe I too should filter my thoughts a bit more, only speak what will surely bring light to the situation. What will I make for dinner tonight? Pizza will satisfy Samantha. Honeymoon steak is Patrick’s favorite. Katrina, my oldest, adores Taco salad. Stuffing casserole, with hamburger, cream of mushroom, and stove top stuffing is a simple, easy favorite of my husband’s. Salmon would be my pick, with peas and wild rice on the side. Whatever I propose will be rejected by someone.

Decisions. Some require a bit more effort because the impact on other people. Should I read her the facts of life book now? Do I leave my family three days a week to pursue my degree? I’m doing this now, you know, allowing family to give what they offered, step in and take over, relinquish my control. Feel the love. Do I remove her from her editor’s decision? Do I give her one more chance? Should I submit this proposal?

Decisions. The ones already made seem the simplest. Why did I think it was such a big deal? Do I break up with him? Do I live off campus or on? Where will we go on the honeymoon? Who gets what side of the bed? Should I accept his proposal?

***“What is that little voice telling you?”***

Empirical

research articles lure

me to disappear for hours.

Topics

wrestle me in their shades

of ambiguity.

Effect? Affect?

Quantitative

or Qualitative?

Eye twitches as I swallow

the bitter coffee.

Voice and new literacies

move me to read Elbow, Beck, Jeffery, Bakhtin, Atwell, Romano

Intermingled with

Lankshear & Knobel, New London Group, Hicks, Kajder, Dredger

I sleep in stages,

read in stages,

write in stages.

***“What is that little voice telling you?”***

Braided Essay

EDCI 5444

Katie Estes, Caleb Guard, Paige Horst

August Is the Sun

I.

August is the sun and everyone else is a planet revolving around him. If you can overcome the world you can overcome the universe. In all the universe, why does this boy choose Boba Fett? Because he wears a mask, and his face is never revealed. Darth Vader—even his face is revealed, and it is quite unpleasant. When we unmask him he is weak, emasculated. But Boba Fett—we are not given the privilege of seeing his face. He is untouchable. Fett is a rogue, and yet all the Star Wars fandom universe shifts from Luke Skywalker to him, a minor character. It is Fett who fetches a high price at toy auctions, Fett who all the kids want to be for Halloween.

II.

Sticks:Stones:Metal:Flesh

Cold iron at my back rings hollow as my heart.

My spine curves,

question with no answer.

Words fill me,

water in a lung

different

loser

weird

retarded

gay

go away

I hate you

The bag in my hand holds

the

end

of

it

all

III.

What if I whenever I shut my eyes, I became a *different* version of myself. My eyes would drop low on my face, slipping down like wax on a candlestick. And my nose--what if it flattened or disappeared entirely? A lump of pancake batter flattening on skillet. A small chiseled hole pecked into the side of tree. I picture my mouth swallowing my lips and my teeth shrinking, shrinking, shrinking till they disappear.

But *I* would still be the same. My insides wouldn’t change or alter. My thoughts and dreams, my internal freckles, are bright and untarnished. I worry no one would see me, hear me, speak to me. Would my family kiss me on the cheek? Would my friends be what they were?

I can see the light shining through my eyelids and I crack them open. My features slip and slide back into place. The world shifts into my normal, but I continue to wonder. Wonder how my life would be *different.* Better? Worse? I almost wish I could put on a mask and see. Try, but not keep. And stop wonder.

IV.

“Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are?

We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. “----Pablo Casals

I have faithfully moved this quote from classroom to classroom, printed and reprinted it, written it out by hand, posted it on corkboards, on classroom doors, over my desks, even threatened to get it tattooed on my skin, a permanent reminder of what I believe to be true. I have been paid to teach children the mechanics of language, the mysteries of literature and poetry...but what I hope I teach them is simply that they are unique, irreplaceable and intrinsically priceless.

V.

*8th grade new kid.* I look down at my uniform and wince. My skirt is a loud blue plaid and my shirt is a clingy white cotton polo. I can feel the sweat bead already on my back and wonder if it’s showing through the shirt. My eyes travel to my shoes. Clunkers. Big, black bricks encasing my toes. I feel awkward.

The teacher begins to call roll and I wait for my name. She moves quickly down the list, glancing up occasionally to greet familiar faces. Nearly everyone talks around me. She pauses and I know she’s reached my name, and I wait for her to look up and scan the room. I raise my hand to make it easier on her. Welcome, she says, and sends me a reassuring smile.

She has everyone introduce themselves and I find out I am one of only two new people in the class. Everyone else has known each other for years. Somehow their shoes seem less clunky, their plaids less obnoxious. I sit back in my chair and watch.

VI.

August is the sun, and everyone else is a planet revolving around him. Without the sun, planets are not held in their solar systems. The interaction of the solar nebula and the solar wind shapes planets in a solar system. Each planet is a unique result of distance from the sun, solar nebula particles and solar wind. Planets in a system act on each other as they form, affecting each other in many ways including gravitational pull. In another solar system, around another sun, with a different environment, different planets would form. Each one is a unique combination of interaction with parent, siblings and universe.

Each interaction we have with others is a unique moment in the universe. Once it has passed, it is gone forever. What do we do with those moments? How can we create meaningful moments as the universe is created and destroyed around us millions of times every day?

VII.

My universe was created and destroyed when I went to camp, like a lamb to the slaughter. I wish I had the mystique of a faceless man encased in armor, invulnerable. Instead I wore glasses and an orthodontic night brace. I felt like Plo Koon, Vader after his mask was removed, a weak and pale monstrosity. Mock me. Punch me. Spit in my face. I write in my journal superficial relays of the day’s activities, not daring to let readers see my pain. The universe was not kind to some of these kids. They are pulled into one another’s orbits. The rest of us are drifting moons, finding one another in a solar hollow.

The counselors feel the shift one night. They flip on the lights and make everyone do pushups. Everyone except me and the drifting moons. I’m smiling as I watch them. It was a necessary kindness, and when I think on that week I feel I took an orbit around the sun, having aged in the light and shadow of its presence. The universe took care of its birds that night.

Rowing the Bus by Paul Logan

When I was in elementary school, some older kids made me row the bus. Rowing meant that on the way to school I had to sit in the dirty bus aisle littered with paper, gum wads, and spitballs. Then I had to simulate motion of rowing while the kids around me laughed and chanted, “Row, row, row the bus.” I was forced to do this by a group of bullies who spent most of their time picking on me.

I was the perfect target for them. I was small. I had no father. And my mother, though she worked hard to support me, was unable to afford clothes and sneakers that were “cool.” Instead she dressed me in outfits that we got from “the bags”—hand-me-downs given as donations to a local church.

Each Wednesday, she’d bring several bags of clothes to the house and pull out musty, wrinkled shirts and worn bell-bottom pants that other families no longer wanted. I knew that people were kind to give things to us, but I hated wearing clothes that might have been donated by my classmates. Each time I wore something from the bags, I feared that the other kids might recognize something that was once theirs.

Besides my outdated clothes, I wore thick glasses, had crossed eyes, and spoke with a persistent lisp. For whatever reason, I had never learned to say the “s” sound properly, and I pronounced words that began with “th” as if they began with a “d.” In addition, because of my severely crossed eyes, I lacked the hand and eye coordination necessary to hit or catch flying objects.

As a result, footballs, baseballs, soccer balls and basketballs became my enemies. I knew, before I stepped on the field or court, that I would do something clumsy or foolish and that everyone would laugh at me. I feared humiliation so much that I became skillful at feigning illnesses to get out of gym class. Eventually I learned how to give myself low-grade fevers so the nurse would write me an excuse. It worked for a while, until the gym teachers caught on. When I did have to play, I was always the last one chosen to be on any team. In fact, team captains did everything in their power to make their opponents get stuck with me. When the unlucky team captain was forced to call my name, I would trudge° over to the team, knowing that no one there liked or wanted me. For four years, from second through fifth grade, I prayed nightly for God to give me school days in which I would not be insulted, embarrassed, or made to feel ashamed.

I thought my prayers were answered when my mother decided to move during the summer before sixth grade. The move meant that I got to start sixth grade in a different school, a place where I had no reputation. Although the older kids laughed and snorted at me as soon as I got on my new bus—they couldn’t miss my thick glasses and strange clothes—I soon discovered that there was another kid who received the brunt of their insults. His name was George, and everyone made fun of him. The

kids taunted him because he was skinny; they belittled him because he had acne that pocked and blotched his face, and they teased him because his voice was squeaky. During my first gym class at my new school, I wasn’t the last one chosen for kickball; George was.

George tried hard to be friends with me, coming up to me in the cafeteria on the first day of school. “Hi. My name’s George. Can I sit with you?” he asked with a peculiar squeakiness that made each word highpitched and raspy. As I nodded for him to sit down, I noticed an uncomfortable silence in the cafeteria as many of the students who had mocked George’s clumsy gait° during gym class began watching the two of us and whispering among themselves. By letting him sit with me, I had violated an unspoken law of school, a sinister code of childhood that demands there must always be someone to pick on. I began to realize two things. If I befriended George, I would soon receive the same treatment that I had gotten at my old school. If I stayed away from him, I might actually have a chance to escape being at the bottom.

Within days, the kids started taunting us whenever we were together.

“Who’s your new little buddy, Georgie?” In the hallways, groups of students began mumbling about me just loud enough for me to hear, “Look, it’s George’s ugly boyfriend.” On the bus rides to and from school, wads of paper and wet chewing gum were tossed at me by the bigger, older kids in the back of the bus.

It became clear that my friendship with George was going to cause me several more years of misery at my new school. I decided to stop being friends with George. In class and at lunch, I spent less and less time with him. Sometimes I told him I was too busy to talk; other times I acted distracted and gave one-word responses to whatever he said. Our classmates, sensing that they had created a rift between George and me, intensified their attacks on him. Each day, George grew more desperate as he realized that the one person who could prevent him from being completely isolated was closing him off. I knew that I shouldn’t avoid him, that he was feeling the same way I felt for so long, but I was so afraid

that my life would become the hell it had been in my old school that I continued to ignore him.

Then, at recess one day, the meanest kid in the school, Chris, decided he had had enough of George. He vowed that he was going to beat up George and anyone else who claimed to be his friend. A mob of kids formed and came after me. Chris led the way and cornered me near our school’s swing sets. He grabbed me by my shirt and raised his fist over my head. A huge gathering of kids surrounded us, urging him to beat me up, chanting “Go, Chris, go!”

“You’re Georgie’s new little boyfriend, aren’t you?” he yelled. The hot blast of his breath carried droplets of his spit into my face. In a complete betrayal of the only kid who was nice to me, I denied George’s friendship.

“No, I’m not George’s friend. I don’t like him. He’s stupid,” I blurted out. Several kids snickered and mumbled under their breath. Chris stared at me for a few seconds and then threw me to the ground.

“Wimp. Where’s George?” he demanded, standing over me. Someone pointed to George sitting alone on top of the monkey bars about thirty yards from where we were. He was watching me. Chris and his followers sprinted over to George and yanked him off the bars to the ground. Although the mob quickly encircled them, I could still see the two of them at the center of the crowd, looking at each other. George seemed stoic, staring straight through Chris. I heard the familiar chant of “Go, Chris, go!” and watched as his fists began slamming into George’s head and body. His face bloodied and his nose broken, George crumpled to the ground and sobbed without even throwing a punch. The mob cheered with pleasure and darted off into the playground to avoid an approaching teacher.

Chris was suspended, and after a few days, George came back to school. I wanted to talk to him, to ask him how he was, to apologize for leaving him alone and for not trying to stop him from getting hurt. But I couldn’t go near him. Filled with shame for denying George and angered by my own cowardice, I never spoke to him again. Several months later, without telling any students, George transferred to another school. Once in a while, in those last weeks before he left, I caught him watching me as I sat with the rest of the kids in the cafeteria. He never yelled at me or expressed anger, disappointment, or even sadness. Instead he just looked at me.

In the years that followed, George’s silent stare remained with me. It was there in eighth grade when I saw a gang of popular kids beat up a sixth-grader because, they said, he was “ugly and stupid.” It was there my first year in high school, when I saw a group of older kids steal another freshman’s clothes and throw them into the showers. It was there a year later, when I watched several seniors press a wad of chewing gum into the hair of a new girl on the bus. Each time that I witnessed another awkward, uncomfortable, scared kid being tormented, I thought of George, and gradually his haunting stare began to speak to me. No longer silent, it told me that every child who is picked on and taunted deserves better, that no one—no matter how big, strong, attractive or popular—has the right to abuse another person.

Finally, in my junior year when a loudmouthed, pink-skinned bully named Donald began picking on two freshmen on the bus, I could no longer deny George. Donald was crumpling a large wad of paper and preparing to bounce it off the back of the head of one of the young students when I interrupted him.

“Leave them alone, Don,” I said. By then I was six inches taller and, after two years of high school wrestling, thirty pounds heavier than I had been in my freshman year. Though Donald was still two years older than me, he wasn’t much bigger. He stopped what he was doing, squinted and stared at me.

“What’s your problem, Paul?”

I felt the way I had many years earlier on the playground when I watched the mob of kids begin to surround George.

“Just leave them alone. They aren’t bothering you,” I responded quietly.

“What’s it to you?” he challenged. A glimpse of my own past, of rowing the bus, of being mocked for my clothes, my lisp, my glasses, and my absent father flashed in my mind.

“Just don’t mess with them. That’s all I am saying, Don.” My fingertips were tingling. The bus was silent. He got up from his seat and leaned over me, and I rose from my seat to face him. For a minute, both of us just stood there, without a word, staring.

“I’m just playing with them, Paul,” he said, chuckling. “You don’t have to go psycho on me or anything.” Then he shook his head, slapped me firmly on the chest with the back of his hand, and sat down. But he never threw that wad of paper. For the rest of the year, whenever I was on the bus, Don and the other troublemakers were noticeably quiet.

Although it has been years since my days on the playground and the school bus, George’s look still haunts me. Today, I see it on the faces of a few scared kids at my sister’s school—she is in fifth grade. Or once in a while I’ll catch a glimpse of someone like George on the evening news, in a story about a child who brought a gun to school to stop the kids from picking on him, or in a feature about a teenager who killed herself because everyone teased her. In each school, in almost every classroom, there is a George with a stricken face, hoping that someone nearby will be strong enough to be kind—despite what the crowd says—and brave enough to stand up against people who attack, tease or hurt those who are vulnerable.

If asked about their behavior, I’m sure the bullies would say, “What’s it to you? It’s just a joke. It’s nothing.” But to George and me, and everyone else who has been humiliated or laughed at or spat on, it is everything. No one should have to row the bus.

**Braided Essay Assignment:** **Rubric**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Exemplary** | **Competent** | **Does Not Meet Expectations** | **Score**  **(Weight)** |
| **Repeated Idea** | Two or more ideas are repeated through varied use of images, phrases, concepts, etc.; supports unifying element | Ideas are repeated through use of images, phrases, concepts, etc, and vaguely supports unifying element | Repetition of ideas are not clear and images, phrases, and concepts fail to support unifying element | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Voice** | Writing demonstrates clear style; conveys personality; control of written expression with use of descriptive language | Writing demonstrates style and conveys glimmers of personality; average control of written expression with some use of descriptive language | Writing fails to demonstrate style and personality; lack of control of written expression and little to no use of descriptive language | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Flow** | Essay has cohesive connections between a variety of complementary strands | Essay has complementary strands, but transiions and connections aren’t clear | There are no connections between braided strands | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Unifying element** | Easily understood theme, which is supported by all strands | Individual ideas are somewhat concise, but lack clear connectivity with other aspects of the paper | Ideas are not concise or connected with other aspects of the paper | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Reflective piece** | Author thoroughly describes writing and collaboration process. | Author somewhat describes writing and collaboration process | Author does not describe writing and collaboration process | (\_\_\_X 1 = \_\_\_) |
| **Grammar, usage, mechanics** | Minor grammatical errors, which don’t distract from content | Some grammatical errors, which distract the reader from the content | Grammatical errors make comprehension difficult | (\_\_\_X 1 = \_\_\_) |
| Total |  |  |  |  |

**Rubric for Book Trailer**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Exemplary**  **2** | **Competent**  **1** | **Does Not Meet Expectations**  **0** | **Score**  **(Weight)** |
| **Quotations** | Quotes reflect comprehension of themes and motifs. | Quotes provide some understanding of plot but nothing of theme. | No quotations selected or quotations seem randomly chosen. | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Images** | Images are overall relevant to the themes, quotations, and audio. | Images selected seem to have something to do with the novel, but do not relate to the quotes or audio. | Images selected do not seem to relate to the novel. | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Music** | Music selection is clean, relates to theme of novel, pairs with images and quotations. | Music selection is mostly clean, relates somewhat to overall theme of novel. | Music includes vulgarity, does not seem to relate to theme, or there is no music. | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Animation, Transition** | Neat transitions are applied; images move and zoom appropriately, text moves but is easily read. | Transitions too distracting, almost no animations or zooms, and text is hard to read or only moves in one or two slides. | No transitions, Images do not move or zoom, and text either does not move or is too animated to read. | (\_\_\_X 2 = \_\_\_) |
| **Rationale/Explanation** | Written rationale explains why the quotations, images, and music samples were selected and presented the way in which they were. | Written rationale explains some decisions made in producing the trailer, but mostly talks about the novel. | Written rationale does not discuss choices made in making of book trailer. | (\_\_\_X 1 = \_\_\_) |
| **Citation** | Quotations, images, and music are all cited appropriately. | Only some media is cited, or partially cited. | Nothing is cited. | (\_\_\_X 1 = \_\_\_) |
| **Total** |  |  |  | \_\_\_\_/20 |

\*Created by pre-service teacher: Caleb Guard